

Turning to the Mystics



Julian of Norwich

Dialogue 3

with James Finley and Kirsten Oates

Jim Finley: Greetings. I'm Jim Finley.

Kirsten Oates: And I'm Kirsten Oates.

Jim Finley: Welcome to Turning to the Mystics.

Kirsten Oates: Welcome, everyone, to season six of Turning to the Mystics, where we've been turning to the mystic Julian of Norwich. I'm here with Jim to record our final dialogue for season six. Welcome, Jim.

Jim Finley: Yes, yes. Good to be back with Julian again. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Wonderful. Well, my first question is around the chapter you chose. The first two reflections were on chapter 10 in the Long Text. For this final reflection you chose chapter five, and I'm just wondering what was it about that chapter?

Jim Finley: Yes, I chose it because it's an example of how all these mystics, really, understood creation as an ongoing act of God in which God is present, intimately present in each passing moment of our life and our breath, the darkness of the night, stones and trees and stars, the smell of flowers, and that it's our estrangement from that that causes our fear and our confusion. And it's through love we can be restored to God's mysterious oneness with us in life itself as a consoling and contemplative way to live in the world. So that's why I chose it. That's really our focus here.

Kirsten Oates: Like a really foundational point that most of the mystics are trying to make for us.

Jim Finley: Exactly, exactly.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: Creation is absolute and perpetual. It's a self-donating act. So if at the count of three, God would cease loving us into the present moment, having this dialogue, at the count of three you and I would disappear, because we're nothing, absolutely nothing, apart from the love of God loving us into this moment. But it's our nothingness without God that makes our very presence to be the presence of God, and the experience of that is the contemplative experience. So she talks in a very lovely poetic way that kind of draws us into cultivating the sensitivity about the divinity or the intimacy of everything. That's why I chose it.

Kirsten Oates: Wonderful. The two chapters you've chosen, 10 and five, they're so rich, and it's been wonderful to have you unpack them with us. Given this is our last dialogue, for people who have the book and might want to look at the other chapters, are they all like this, that you could just sit with them for a long time and there's so much packed into them?

Jim Finley: She never lightens up. That is, I mean, the very first sentence, the very first paragraph, it starts. And that's why it's listening to music. You just stay with her patiently and she becomes internalized. So you pick up sensitivities. She guides us, a trustworthy guidance, and little by little, this constancy of her God consciousness and life and God's mercy on us and our brokenness, it's all... And that's why you could finish the whole Long Text and then go back and start over again and just repeat it over and over until you die, and you'd never exhaust

it. The gospels are like that. That's what's lovely about her. Then if you care to, on your own, you can read commentaries like Grace Jantzen's book *Julian of Norwich*, and Paul Molinari, *Julian of Norwich*. And if you want to, if you're inclined, you can do the commentaries and come back and look at her. But we're using them here in the podcast as poetic little ways to be touched by the presence of God in our life. From the first paragraph to the last, she just holds this. Amazing, really, her mind.

Kirsten Oates: I was struck by her words in this chapter where she says, "And these words of the goodness of God are very dear to the soul and very close to touching our Lord's will." It seems she's very confident in what she's saying, that it's her words, "Close to touching our Lord's will." I'm just wondering, one, have you felt like that, Jim, when you're channeling something you've been given? And do you see that confidence in her?

Jim Finley: Yes. I think in the language of these mystics that we're being perpetually created by God, as God's beloved. And as God's beloved, God wills for us to realize that we're God's beloved, that is we're the touch or the taste of God. And when we realize that we're God's beloved, which brings peace, then with it comes God's capacity given to us to say yes to that. So, God's our beloved. So we give ourselves in love to the beloved, who's infinitely being given to us as beloved's beloved. And that union, that reciprocity, God wants us to experience that because that's our destiny on this Earth in a veiled way, but it's foreshadowings of eternal life. We'll spend all of eternity in this reciprocity of love.

Then when we hear words like this, it's inherently consoling. I mean, it's beautiful, or we want to sit with it, or we become aware of how sad it is that we're not more habitually sensitized to this. And so her writings, to sit with her writings, the trustworthy guidance is to stay with it, and little by little by little it becomes more an underlying habitual sensitivity to God's unexplainable nearness. Like Saint Augustine, closer to us than we are to ourselves. And it's a spiritual groundedness as we go through life.

Kirsten Oates: Do you have that experience sometimes, Jim, when you're writing or teaching, that confidence of-

Jim Finley: I think for me, to tell you the truth, I just think it's there all the time. No, I can't explain it. It's just like an unquestioned sense of... Buddhists say, "Don't grow a second head." If you're frying eggs, don't fry eggs and go in the... So when I'm cooking breakfast, I'm cooking breakfast. But there's an awareness that there's something holy or something that unexplainably matters very much about fixing breakfast. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." And I have that. Then when I'm in silence or I'm writing or speaking, it comes more vividly conscious, but it's more vividly conscious of something that atmospherically is always there inside of me somehow. I can't explain it, but that's what it feels like.

Kirsten Oates: I wanted to turn to one of the central points in this chapter, the hazelnut. There's quite a bit to unpack with her vision of the hazelnut. Can I start by asking about the smallness of it? You talked about even it could have been a grain of sand, something much smaller. So there's the size of it, but there's something else about the smallness. It's not just the size. Yeah.

Jim Finley: So the hazelnut, again, could be anything created and compared to God, like he has a itty-bitty baby in his hands, he has the whole wide world in his hands. So we're holding in our

hand something small as a hazelnut. She doesn't say what it is. So the idea is it's not just small in that it's physically small, but she says it's small because it is so small. She's amazed it can continue to exist. So really, its smallness is its fragility in time, see? How is something so small, so fragile? And so I think the poetic insight is this, our ego self, our unawakened ego self is passing through time. It's temporary. We'll all be dead real soon, see?

So the ego self that's passing away holds in its hand that something is passing away, see? Because everything's passing away. And yet in interior contemplative consciousness, that which at one level is passing away is never passing away because it's God pouring out and being given to us in and as that which is passing away in its depth that never passes away. Like we die, but we do not die, see? That that which appears is endlessly passing away, the appearance is passing away, but that which is appearing never passes away because it's eternal in God.

So she's inviting us to drop... Just what meditation is, dropping down in a quiet, a more interior awareness of and oneness with more interior depths of the moment in which we're sitting as they drop down into the bottomless abyss of God as a state of oneness, sustaining us right in the moment in which we're sitting. So I think when she lived in her anchorhold in that the simplicity and the solitude and the silence, it was like a pervasive constancy of that sensitivity. And she's writing to us out of that, encouraging us to do that. It's harder for us out here in the world. We don't live in a cloistered monastery. But I do think we can develop a contemplative culture in our heart. We can learn to establish a daily rendezvous with God, a kind of a sustained sensitivity to the unexplainable wholeness of our breath, or the smell of a flower, the passage of time. We can learn to cultivate that with God's grace, and I think that's what she's inviting us to here.

Kirsten Oates: So just to be clear for myself, so it's no bigger than a hazelnut in terms of this metaphor of it's small in relation to life and finite time, in a way, but she could be referring to a mountain.

Jim Finley: Yes.

Kirsten Oates: Could she be referring to the whole cosmos?

Jim Finley: Yes, she would be. Because if a twig or a grain of sand, see, is nothing without God loving, God's presence presence-ing itself and as the presence of the grain of sand, since every grain of sand throughout the world is like that, see, since every tree is like that, since every mountain range is like that, since every flower is like that, then the whole cosmos is that. See? But she keeps narrowing it down concretely to the immediacy of our own experience. So the palms of my own hands is God's horizon.

Heidegger talks about horizon can be the point beyond which we can't see. If I go out and look at the ocean out here, the horizon's the point over which I can't see. He said, "But the horizon can also be the point in which the unmanifested is manifesting itself." And so the palms of my own hands is God's horizon. My breath is God's horizon. A bird and the tree is God's horizon. She's trying to cultivate this sensitivity

to the divinity or the presence of God, presence in the presence of everything.

Kirsten Oates: Is it part of her teaching to say that she could be looking at something small and concrete, she could be looking at a mountain, she could be looking up into the stars and the sense of the whole world, and is part of the smallness its relationship to God's presence and the way it sits in relation to God as the bigger source of creation of it all?

Jim Finley: Yes. Let's put it this way, this would be a way to say it, maybe try to get it. Let's say that God is infinite presence itself, and God is beginningless presence, that is God never, never, never, never wasn't, and God never, never, never won't be. The Buddhists talk about, "Beyond beginningless beginnings, beyond endless ends." See? And so there's this eternal oceanic beginningless, endless. Then God contemplates us in the Word eternally, forever, hidden with Christ and God before the origins of the universe.

So when God says, "Fiat, let there be the night, let there be fire, let there be water, let there be you," God brings out into manifested reality this moment in which we're talking right now, brings each of us into time. But the point is this, more the language of Meister Eckhart, he said that, "The amazing thing about a word," Eckhart says, "is that what I know about Julian of Norwich in myself, ensuring that with you, it doesn't cease to be what it is in me." Likewise, when God speaks us into the present moment, we don't cease to be who we are in God, hidden with Christ and God before the origins of the universe.

So it's almost like a contemplation that we taste within ourself, the self that is beginningless, because God has never, never, never, never not known who you are as the beloved in God. And God will never cease to know who you eternally are, see? But we know it in a timeless moment of time, see? Richard Rohr calls it, "Deep time." It's a moment of the pause, and it's the eternality of the fleetingness, the fleeting or the passing away of that which never passes away. I think that's the poetry of this, I think, is you can't grasp it, but you can poetically hear in the language of it, something in us knows of it. You know what I mean? And we long to abide there.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Well, that makes sense, too, when you said it's the ego holding the small thing because both of those things are small in relation to that place where we're hidden in God, like you said.

Jim Finley: Yes.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, yeah.

Jim Finley: But in the deep down depths of ourself, through the generosity of God, we are that.

Kirsten Oates: We are that. Yeah.

Jim Finley: That's the beloved.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: And it's through love and through surrender, through silence and contemplation, we can drop down into the intimacy of that directly.

Kirsten Oates: Because they're not separate from each other.

Jim Finley: No.

Kirsten Oates: They're not two distinct things. Yeah.

Jim Finley: No. I also think when people would come to see her for spiritual direction, they would come to the window. And they so look forward to a time with her, because I think in her presence they sense this within herself, see? And I think she wrote this for us so that we, in sitting with it, we might realize it within ourselves, too. I mean, it's the kind of a timeless ministry for us to be touched like this.

Kirsten Oates: She talks about the three properties of the small thing, that, "God made it, God loves it, and God preserves it." But she also says, "It lasts because God loves it." Love seems to be the central point, and I'm wondering if God making it, God loving it, God preserving it, is it all an act of love?

Jim Finley: Yes.

Kirsten Oates: Is love the foundation? Could you talk about that?

Jim Finley: When I was in the monastery studying medieval philosophy with Dan Walsh and Duns Scotus and the medieval Thomas Aquinas, one of the ways he would put it is that, "Before creation there was no capacity for love in God because God is [foreign language 00:15:39]." If you have a glass on a table and you fill it up with water and it's overflowing, there's no more capacity for water in the cup. So there's no capacity for infinite love in God. Therefore, God creates the capacity for infinite love, and that's you, see? God creates a *capax dei*. God creates this. Jonathan Cross says this too, "God creates a self that God can pour the infinite totality of himself into as our ultimate identity that God wills for us." See?

So what we're learning to do, then, is how to keep opening our heart wider and wider to keep surrendering to this love that's surrendering itself over to us. And it isn't just that it's surrendering itself over to us in every moment, which is life. It isn't just that it just fleetingly surrenders itself over to us when we fleetingly become conscious of it in a moment of prayer, or silence, or art, or poetry, whatever, but rather God is perpetually pouring it and will never cease to pour it into us. See, now it's veiled through appearances. But when we pass through the veil of death, we go into unveiled infinite union of the eternity of ourselves, like forever and ever and ever, that everything real is forever. That love is eternal.

Out of Teresa of Ávila, "Let nothing disturb thee. Let nothing frighten thee. All things are passing. God alone remaineth. Patience obtains all things." Just wait long enough. You won't be here. See? But who you are in God will be here forever. Chill out, relax. This'll all be over. This will all be over before you know it. But it doesn't mean this doesn't matter. It has infinite implications how we live each moment for love's sake.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, that's helpful and beautiful. And then it makes the next point confusing where she

talks about, “Despising as nothing everything created.” It’s like she takes a little turn there and-

Jim Finley: Yeah, she does. Let’s say, first of all, it’s obvious she doesn’t mean it the way it might first sound.

Kirsten Oates: Yes, yeah.

Jim Finley: Because you wouldn’t say, “Despise the sunset, despise your beating heart, despise the smell of the rose, despise the fresh...” She would never think that. What she’s saying is this, despise the temptation to imagine that we’re nothing but the self things happen to. See? Despise the temptation that anything less than infinite union with the infinite love of God will ever be enough for us. “Because you made us for yourself, oh Lord, our hearts are restless till they rest in thee. Not until we rest in your gifts, which all flow from you, but they’re infinitely less than you.” See? And so despise settling, see, for something you can gain or lose, see? Despise settling is that anything that you’ve done in the past or failed to do in the past has the authority to name who you are, see? Despise the notion that you are nothing but the self conditioned by conditioned states, see? And try to find this timeless depth-like loving presence that permeates and transcends all conditioned states, which is very God.

Kirsten Oates: And then in the end, what you were saying a little earlier was we can come back around and actually find it in the concrete things, that presence.

Jim Finley: That’s right. Because, see, once I see the nothingness of all things without God, this is not the beloved, this is not the beloved, this is not the beloved, it’s in realizing the nothingness without God, we see God shining through as the reality of all things in the nothingness without God. But when we try, Merton says, through “possessiveness of heart” to imagine that there’s something there we can have, that very notion that it’s real apart from God, real to the self that thinks it’s real apart from God, this is where suffering arises, but in this seeing the empty...

This is why I think when we’re unraveled by a deep love, where we’re unraveled by a moment of the immensity of the nearness of death, there’s certain moments that kind of unravel the customary confines we tend to work in. In that unraveled state, there’s a kind of a boundaryless communion that we realize that alone is ultimately real. See? But we lived in the claustrophobic world. We’re trying to be liberated from what hinders us from overflowing appearances into this presence that is the reality of all appearances.

Kirsten Oates: And then she makes that point too right at the beginning where she talks about, “God is to us everything which is good,” which is not saying God only arises in good things, but when you see the presence of God, it’s good, and you can see it in these-

Jim Finley: That’s right.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. That’s right?

Jim Finley: Yes. And I think two things there. One, I use the example of sitting out, it’s a chilly morning, with a shawl and knowing that somehow the nearness of God is concretized in the warmth of that shawl, or in a sip of hot tea, or, I mean, whatever. You can sense the nearness of God

in that. But she's also saying something else here too is that it's the mystery of the cross. It gets back to her visions. See? See, the mystery of the cross, the mystery of love crucified is even in the midst of terrible things and in the terrible things that really are terrible, without romanticizing them, they're really tragic and regrettable. And also, it isn't just what was done to us but what was done to us, did to us, how it leaves us walking around with this internalized hurt. All that, see?

But we're saying that as we keep walking this walk, as terrible as it is, it's not just terrible, but there's a love that shines through it. And a lot of the wisdom, I think, as time goes by that we've learned about mercy or fragility or grace has really come out of suffering through something, see? And we come out the other side. We're grateful when we see it moving behind us, but we're also grateful if we've not learned the wisdom that we were given there, see? That there's something, a love, that as terrible as it was, it was a sustaining love that was infinitely more real, where we wouldn't even be here anymore. And to know that God's not done with us yet, there's more suffering ahead, we don't know what lies ahead, but it'll be more of the same. The grace that floats to the bittersweet alchemy of the rise and fall of everything up to the moment of our own death, trusting the underlying divinity that permeates all of it intimately like this and knowing it in your heart, it's true, that you learn to live by it.

Kirsten Oates: I like how when we started talking about suffering, some suffering noise started up in the background.

Jim Finley: It did.

Kirsten Oates: Is that a leaf blower?

Jim Finley: Yeah. It's another leaf blower in the neighborhood. Friday apparently is leaf blower day. We should remember that. By the way, there's two ways to look at this. Again, it really is regrettable. We and the listeners wished it wasn't there, but you know what else? That person running the leaf blower is trying to feed his family. See? That counts. See, he's trying to get to another day because that's how he lives. And so if I would yell out the window, "Shut up! Don't you see you're disrupting a mystical system here?" he would go, "What the hell? What are you saying?" And so that shows you how something is regrettable, but you can see it that it's not just regrettable. Everything has that quality to it, I think.

Kirsten Oates: Yes, yeah. With that in mind, Jim, do the things that make us suffer, do they have those same three properties, God made it, God loves it, God preserves it?

Jim Finley: I want to say something about suffering. It's a mystery. It's a mystery there is this suffering. Being on this path means you're called to be an awake, nurturing, caring, protective person who does not deliberately do anything to cause suffering or to be indifferent to the suffering of the world. That's the imperative of love. That's true. It's how Christ walked this Earth. When suffering is present, the measure of the authenticity of this depth is a heightened sensitivity of being called or impelled to reach out to touch the suffering with love that it might dissolve in love, and the way that we're called to do it. She was called to do it by living in solitude, writing this. See? And so in the midst of our family, in the midst of our situation. And when we do do love's work, we realize that in the touch of love, some of the suffering

comes back through the touch, we can get overwhelmed.

So we owe it to ourself and to the one we're helping how to pace ourself to back away enough but not to keep running away, to be grounded in love, to come back again and continue touching with love. That's love's work. And an inner peace is not dependent on the outcome of the effort because by human standards it may go down in flames. See? But rather because it's the peace of God on which everything depends, and that's the mystery of the cross. See, the mystery of the cross is that by human standards it was over. And it was over. He was executed and he died. See? And as we said in the previous talk, when he died, they pierced his heart with a lance, and blood and water flowed out like at the birth of a child. Then there was no more Jesus left in Jesus. And then the only Jesus that was ever really there shined bright throughout the whole world to this day.

So when Jesus says, "Follow me," it sounds like a good idea till we see where he is taking us, which is the cross, which is the crucifixion. How to die of love at the hands of love till there's nothing left of us but love, which alone is eternal, real, vast and true. And that's universally intimate to all of us because it unfolds in my life and unfolds in your life. We're trying to walk with fidelity to that. I think that's where she's coming from.

Kirsten Oates: That's a main point of her teaching is it, Jim? Because she really does focus on the cross as her starting point.

Jim Finley: All the way through. Yeah, that love is his meaning. See, we see the exterior. That's why there's certain things at one level that appear one way, but you look deeper, they're very different. So something that one level really is, for example, terrible, for example, the violent death and the cruelty of it, but you look deeper here, the very thing that one level really is cruel and violent is the deliverance of the whole world unexplainably to the deathless nature of love taking us to itself and all our wayward ways and all of our brokenness. Turning to the Mystics will continue in a moment.

Kirsten Oates: Another point she makes in this chapter about the way we come to God, and I think it's building on what you've been sharing about suffering, but this way of coming, as she calls, with the nakedness. Being naked, it's such a physical word, but we're talking about some kind of interior experience. Is that right, Jim?

Jim Finley: Yes. Let's say, here's how I see she's put this chapter together, she's given all this talk almost like the flowing out from God, like the nature of reality through love. And then she's saying, "And this being so," that is since God's love is like this, this moment, this also suggests that if this is how God's coming to us so unexplainably, it then suggests how God would have us come to God. And so naked, at one sense, it's such a physical... And I use example of marital love, but marital love in the sense of, not every married couple has this, where it isn't just that they're comfortable being physically naked but they're naked in that they're seen through and through just as they are with all their limitations like this, being free to be loved just as you are with nothing to hide behind, like you're free like this.

This is why I think in AA where they talk about a "fearless inventory" of your past, a fearful inventory is you already know enough bad things about yourself and wonder what else is back there. A fearless inventory doesn't matter what's back there, it's just more a view

that God infinitely loves through and through and through. And your acceptance of your limitation is the condition for that love. It's the good news, really. So it's that nakedness, which is a kind of... Because God sees it all anyway. God's not trying to figure out who you are, as if that works. And same as, "Well, God came in the cool of the evening, they hid," as if that would help after the fall. It's like, I don't think you two grasp the situation here."

But then I also think we can learn to be naked with ourself. It's hard to admit the extent to which the self hide itself from itself, see? And what is it we can't bear to see because we believe it has authority to name who we are? But how can I feel safe enough? Sometimes it's in the presence of someone in whose presence it's safe to let ourselves see it because they already do. See? And little by little we can become more and more interiorly naked. That doesn't mean at another level we don't need to be discreet about what we share or don't share, because it's very important, really. So this nakedness is this inner freedom, I think, to be unclothed in the presence of this love. See?

And then we do it openly in those secrets. See? There's nothing hidden. Because God is given to us intimately as a whole. God's given to us forever. And therefore, we're to be very open and receptive and open, and open to the next thing love might ask of us. We don't know what love's going to ask, but whatever that is, with God's grace, I'm open to that. See? And then familiar means... One translation of the word is homely. Homely doesn't mean not attractive, but homely as in very domesticated, as the person you're so comfortable with, being alone and being with each other is the same thing. It's so ordinary and so comfortable in the rhythms of the day with each other, and God's that way with us, see, that we're so habitually comfortable in the ordinariness of getting up in the morning and going to bed at night and the rhythms of the day, God's the infinity of the rhythms of the day of it, and we're trying to move that way, I think.

Kirsten Oates: What's coming to me is in this reflection is out here in the world, you have to be very careful with nakedness. We need good boundaries. You've got to know who you're with and appropriate times and things like that. So there's something about a starting point of trust and a trust in God, in being God's beloved that I can come boundaryless because it's safe, it's loving, it's compassionate, and there's nothing to fear.

Jim Finley: Yes. I think this is what makes child abuse so terrible is the child is in a vulnerable state of the parent, to trust. And then when the parent betrays that through their own woundedness, either physically, emotionally or sexually, the devastating effects of that. And there is a sense of interiorly open. Wise as a serpent and simple as a dove. Is this person safe to share this with? Would they even be capable of understanding it? Jesus said, "Don't cast your pearls before swine." See? Be very careful with the treasure and don't expose yourself to people. There's a sense of wise boundaries, but the boundaries should be porous. We should always be opening and look for the opening where we send out a little trial to see if it works or not and pull back and look. So this kind of discretion, this kind of mature adult discretion about each person and each situation's important. We end up getting deeply hurt over and over again.

Kirsten Oates: But God's not like that. And that's sometimes the challenging transition for people, isn't it? To move into this nakedness with God is even somatically like a... It's a challenge to let go of themselves into and trust in a loving presence.

Jim Finley: See, yeah, that's why I say it's like one prayer we're afraid to say is, "Thy will be done." It's a strange idea, in a way, but I think it's true. It's like, "Thy will be done," and God goes, "Okay, you asked for it. Brace yourself. Here comes a terrible thing."

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, yeah.

Jim Finley: So if God is really infinite tenderness and generosity forever, the image I use is a field with no stones in it, see? It's safe. But the thing is, if we've been hurt and if we're being taken by love into love, our boundaries, at a psychological level, our boundaries are slipping away. Is this possible that I can be safe and vulnerable at the same time? What is it to taste this mercy sustaining me? It's especially complicated because what it does is it triggers our own trigger points inside and it activates certain things where we're really activating certain less than loving voices about ourself. And we might attribute those to God. But really, it's really, this is the art of spiritual direction or discernment, how to tease this out and work through all of that.

Kirsten Oates: And at one point you talked about your life in the monastery, that every detail was intended to foster this kind of nakedness and a spiritual worldview and an understanding of God's oneness with us. But out in the world we have to cultivate this, you said, "A contemplative culture in our heart." Can you talk about some of the aspects in the monastery and how they might translate into our lives?

Jim Finley: When I was in the monastery, a cloistered monastery, so there was no television, no radio, no newspapers, it was cloistered. Some of the monks when I was there, this is 1968, like that, '60. I mean, when I graduated it was 1961 when I entered. So some of the monks entered before they invented television sets. They never saw television. And there was no magazines outside. So one of the monks gave a talk to the monks in the chapter room on a major feast day. But they did have the library. They had biblical journals and theological journals. He said, "In one of the journals in the library, I read a poem by this person named Bob Dylan." He said, "I don't know who Bob Dylan is. Never heard of him." He said, "It was a great poem." And he said, though, his understanding, it was called Desolation Row, and he said, "It's the ending of a relationship and you know it's because of you it's falling... You live on Desolation Row."

He says, "Every day we stand facing each other in choir, chanting the Psalms back and forth, back and forth." At the end of each psalm, they all bow over, "Glory be to the Father, to the son." "And as I stand there looking across the aisle like this, you wouldn't know this because we don't talk to each other, but I'm having a hard time living here. And we're chanting the Psalms. I look across the aisle at the reason why it's so hard. It's all of you giving me a hard time. And then I realize maybe you're looking across the aisle and maybe I'm contributing to your problems. It's not working here. We're chanting on Desolation Row."

But at the end of each psalm, we bow over, "Glory be to the Father, and to the son, and to the Holy Spirit," like that. We fulfill each other, words that so fulfill the will of Christ. See? It's in our communal brokenness that the mercy of Christ shines through us. And so chanting on Desolation Row is a poetic way to look at life. There's always something unresolved, something that hurts from another person or the past or so. And so it's not working if we depend on figuring this out on our terms and making it all work. It never

does. But if we can rest with this merciful love that permeates and sustains us and all that's unresolved and all that hurts, there's a certain tenderness to the edges of it all, and we can learn to trust in that and live by that.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. There's a lot of resetting of expectation-

Jim Finley: Exactly.

Kirsten Oates: ... and commitment. I guess that's done very intentionally when you enter the monastery. It's quite clear why you're there, what your intention is, what your commitments are.

Jim Finley: It is. But here's the thing I would say, in married love, that's the intention, too. When two people get married, they don't stand at the altar and say, "I promise you to make life perpetually miserable for you through my resentments, my jealousy, my anger, my withholding." "Well, I promise to give you a hard time by bickering and so on." Yet even though they married each other to love each other, they brought into the marriage the hurt they brought with them, and they acted out on each other.

But that's built right into mystical marriage. It's built right into it. If you pull each other's covers, let's say real and honest with each other, you sift each other like wheat, if you let it. Sometimes you need professional help to sort through certain things. So, marriage has built right into it by God a certain kind of incarnational tenderness, or mercy, or forgiveness, or patience, whatever. It's the same with parenting. In other words, there's a certain underlying inherent rhythm. And we can learn to drop down through broken off places to settle into continuity with the rhythms and live by that. And then we can have a contemplative culture in our heart, if that makes sense.

Kirsten Oates: Yes, yeah. And how about, Jim, referring back to this idea about God loves and preserves all things? Is there a kind of practice where we might see, how do we translate that sense of God's being in created things?

Jim Finley: Here's one way I see it. I'm sitting here now having this talk with you. A few months from now I'll be 80 years old. I'm sitting here with all these books on the mystics all around me. We're talking. I'm sitting here with the sensitivities that we're sharing with each other and knowing this is touching people listening to this. And if I ask myself, "How is this possible? How did I get here?" You know what I mean? A traumatized child from Akron, Ohio. I mean, seriously. Seriously.

Therefore, I think you look back at your own life up until now, thousands of painful cul-de-sacs, stumbling this way and that, and this way and that. But somehow we're on a journey not of our own making. See, Thomas Merton was saying this in the Catholic tradition, "Every time you receive the Eucharist, you must realize that someone's taking perfectly good care of you." So I think to hear language like this and have it touch our heart, someone's taking perfectly good care of us, and we can just sit and be amazed by the unfolding of things like that. I think that's what this kind of reading does for us or this prayer does for us. It drops down into the deeper place where the currents of these grace rhythms flow. And we can learn to be more and more habitually sensitized to that.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. That's beautiful. And so we might listen to these words. And at the end of the podcast,

I have a tree outside my window, and just sit gazing at the tree and sensing God's presence in the tree, creating the beauty of the tree, the treeness of the tree.

Jim Finley: No, it's really true. I live here at the ocean. I have a little patio and some flowers. For several years I had a little hummingbird feeder and not a single hummingbird ever. So I went out and got a bigger blown glass hummingbird feeder, and I hung it more toward the edge of the porch. And I sit out there in the mornings and I write. I do my writing. And a hummingbird visits every morning. Hummingbirds are like little jewels. They hover, and I watch the hummingbirds. So little things like that, we can see a certain depth of unexplainable beauty, like the incomprehensible stature of simple things intimately realized, and life is woven with those. We can learn to see those everywhere if we look close enough.

Kirsten Oates: So Julian says, "I can never have perfect rest or true happiness until I am so attached to him that there can be no created thing between my God and me." And I'm wondering, is this possible, this kind of rest, this true happiness? Is this possible while we're in our finite bodies in time?

Jim Finley: In mystical union, when we pass through the veil into glory, what happens sometimes, God doesn't wait until we're dead to access us infinitely. That's the mystic union. And so even though you're not dead yet, that is you've not biologically died, through the grace of God, you've interiorly died to everything less than the infinite love of God as the sole basis of your security and identity. So it is possible, otherwise she couldn't have written this.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Jim Finley: So she bears witness. See, "My heart has not deceived me." See? "I'm sitting in the presence of someone in whom bears witness this is possible." But I think it's possible in this sense that a person can come to this habitual oneness and live by it when they're still in time, but they live by it when they're still in time in the midst of the hazards of the day. See? So when I discovered the lawn blower was going on because I didn't close the window, I was good natured about it because I didn't want to swear in front of all these people. I didn't want to scandalize the listeners by berating myself out loud with self-loathing, the stupidity. So I was nonchalant about it.

But the point is, I think that's the bittersweet alchemy. See, that somehow, even the ups and downs of the unresolved, everyone has their own little patterns, see, that even that is shot through with grace. And Thomas Merton once said in the monastery to me in direction, he says, "This whole path is as serious as death. And that's why, without a sense of humor, you won't make it. You just won't make it." We need to be kind of lighthearted toward taking the folly of ourselves seriously. It's like our teacher.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: And somehow, God's infinitely present in the foolishness itself. That's what I think it's like. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. So in a way, that rest is rest from reactivity. We're not so reactive to-

Jim Finley: Exactly. I would define it even more, it's rest from reactivity, including rest from not being

peaceful till we can stop being reactive. See? It's rest from reactivity in the very midst of reactivity.

Kirsten Oates: Reactivity. Yes.

Jim Finley: Thich Nhat Hanh says, "Hello, habit energies." There's certain habits, and when they get triggered, "Hello, habit energies," like, "There I go again being me," when I spill the coffee or some crazy thing. But there's a certain delight in that. And notice when someone loves a child very much, or say someone you love very much has died, what you cherish is the simple inimitable qualities of their presence. It's just the immediacy of ourselves as we are, like the divinity of the unresolved kind of charm of it all.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Much more about what it was like to be in their presence and how you felt connected to them. Yeah.

Jim Finley: Exactly. And then not only is there that way of seeing our relationship with them that way, but there's the self relationships to itself. How can I learn to appreciate myself that way and join God in being charmed by my foibles? You know what I mean? To roll the waves of it. Because it's like that.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. So the rest, you may still be reactive, but you don't double down on yourself-

Jim Finley: Exactly, yeah.

Kirsten Oates: ... and then be annoyed at you as you begin to see yourself more clearly. Because that is part of this path, isn't it, Jim, that things that were unconscious and you were kind of merged in with, you begin to see them? And so the opportunity is to offer yourself love and compassion, or, like you said, some humor versus doubling down and being, "Now I see my reactivity. Now I can be extra frustrated and reactive to my reactivity."

Jim Finley: That's why I use that example in the Merton talk where let's say the issue you've been working on all your life is a temper. You're in the hospital, and your last act on this Earth is throwing a bed pan and then you die. Then I say, this is regrettable. You're hoping for a better exit. But the real question, did you throw it knowing God loves people who throw bed pans, God loves people who don't? See? Or did you die in the idolatry of attainment? That doesn't mean we don't need to take responsibility for our growing edges, because we do. But the peace isn't dependent on the extent to which we're able... The thorn in the flesh, where God told Paul, "Leave it there. Because that unresolved thorn in the flesh, the stumbling place, is your realization of how I'm present and your life is mercy."

Kirsten Oates: She talks about "the will." She's talking about, "The soul, when by its will has become nothing for love." What is the role of the will, and how would we experience that?

Jim Finley: Well, here's an example I use for married love, put it this way. Let's say you've been for many years in this relationship, this deeply loving relationship. And let's say someone that, say, you went to high school with hasn't seen you in years and comes to town and visits, and you tell them about this person, this relationship. They say, "Oh, really? Tell me." So you describe the person and their qualities. And the person says, "No, I don't mean that. I don't mean that. Who is it that so moves you in knowing who this person is and your love for this person?"

See? And you don't know what to say, and your heart breaks when you try. See? I think that's love. See?

I also think, I get this feeling, to expand this out, I think that when every poet, or every artist, or every healer, there's that certain breaking point where the very presence is something unsayable and unmanageable. It's giving itself and the generosity of the love that keeps moving you forward. See? Otherwise, it's just crafts. I mean, you're putting pegs in the holes and lining things up. But there's something. Merton once said, "We should get done on our knees right now and thank God we can't live the way we want to." You can't love and live on your own terms, but when you learn to live by love, you live on love's terms, which sifts us like wheat, keeps breaking us open, unexplainably. I think God's the infinity of that.

Kirsten Oates: And so the role of the will is to keep saying yes to that.

Jim Finley: I think the will, on the one hand, I keep willing to keep doing my best to overcoming the habits that hurt me and other people. I have to be sincere about that and work on that. And the will is also to do what love calls me to do for my body, my mind, this person, the family, this moment it's true. But also, my will is to die to my own will as the final say in determining God's infinite will for me. See? For God wills for me the infinity of herself. God wills for the infinity of himself. See? And that's infinitely beyond my own will. That's the mystery of it, I think, is we're... My burden is to do the will of the one who sent me and the infinite beloved. See? And we're surrendering to that infinite love will that overwhelms and transforms and guides our will, and we will to move in accordance with that.

Kirsten Oates: It reminds me of what we were talking about earlier, how she talks about you need to despise the created thing, but also then later you see God's goodness in the created thing. It's similar with the will. We need to kind of let go of the will as having the final say on who we are, but will our will towards God's love and God's infinite. Yeah.

Jim Finley: Exactly. That we are, I'll use closing the window as an example. When the stumbling event happens, in the immediacy of it, we can get reactive. Merton once said, "We should always meditate on when we get discouraged after a failing." See? He said, "Because the discouragement after a failing reveals our secret agenda, a holy me." See? As I'm trying to live up to some standard. See? And every time I'm not there yet, I get disheartened. I'm not still as holy as I thought I was. But if instead, every time we stumble, we catch ourselves instead placing our confidence in the ability to measure up to this measureless love that sustains us in our inability to measure up, see, that's the thing I think about Jesus.

Kirsten Oates: That's really helpful as a practice. I'm going to start that today. So it's meditating when I feel that sense of condemning myself or being frustrated with myself. That's a time to take a pause and notice what my own agenda or my own voice is saying that might be different to knowing myself as beloved and infinitely loved.

Jim Finley: The issue really isn't who my father thought I was, who my mother thought I was, or my spouse, or my lover. The real issue isn't who I think I am. Can I join God, and who God eternally knows me to be, hidden with Christ and God forever? See? I realize that every time I get reactive, I've lost touch with that. See? Then I have to say, "But then I have to be tenderhearted towards..." We catch ourselves in the act of perpetuating violence on the

part of us that needs to be loved the most. The reactivity is a still unhealed hurting place. Because where did that come from? See? How far back do I have to go to trace the origins of the tripping place? And how could I be more tenderhearted towards it and more insightful towards it? I think the whole thing's important that way. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Well, we're coming to a close, Jim, and this is the end of our dialogues in season six. We'll take questions from listeners in a final session. But how are you feeling about this season?

Jim Finley: I felt very good about it. This whole thing's been a grace to me, these sessions, and to be able to share these mystics that had such a big effect on me, and that I know that it's touching and helping people, it's been a real grace for me.

Kirsten Oates: Have you enjoyed being back with Julian?

Jim Finley: Very much so. Like I said, I said this at the beginning, unlike Jonathan Cross and Teresa and Eckhart and some of these other people, some Zen masters and so on, she wasn't someone that I ever really sunk deeply into. I've been aware, I've been in a hermitage a couple of times, aware of her. I spent a year with her at the sitting group, and very aware. So this was a chance for me as a kind of a beginner, I guess, to very prayerfully walk real slow through just the depth and beauty of her mind. She's an amazing woman to me. She's extraordinary.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, I've really enjoyed it. I've really felt her presence. Yeah.

Jim Finley: Yeah, very much so.

Kirsten Oates: It's beautiful.

Jim Finley: Yeah, really.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Well, thanks again, Jim, for another wonderful season and for all that you're doing for us. We're grateful for the sharing.

Jim Finley: Yes, and thank you. Some of the people comment that our dialogues are so helpful. Today was a good example of facilitating the process by certain questions. I think it really helps to move it along and gives it a certain substance that it didn't have before. So, thank you for that. And Corey's behind the scenes, and many thanks to Corey-

Kirsten Oates: Yes, thank you, Corey.

Jim Finley: ... too, for making it possible that way. Okay, wonderful.

Kirsten Oates: Okay, good. Thank you. Thank you for listening to this episode of Turning to the Mystics, a podcast created by the Center for Action and Contemplation. We're planning to do episodes that answer your questions, so if you have a question, please email us at podcasts@cac.org or send us a voicemail at cac.org/voicemails. All of this information can be found in the show notes. We'll see you again soon.